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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District: **Georgetown Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **3255 and 3259 Prospect Street NW**

Meeting Date: **March 23, 2017** (x) Subdivision  
Case Number: **17-182** (x) New construction

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

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The applicant, property owner the Elliott LLC (with architects Beyer Blinder Belle), requests the Board’s review of a concept to combine two lots and construct a four-story multi-unit residential building on the site of a one-story noncontributing building.

This project has been reviewed a half-dozen times in 2015 and 2016 by the Old Georgetown Board (OGB) of the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA or “Commission”). The Commission has approved the concept pictured in the attached drawings, and asked to see design development before reviewing permit drawings. The Commission approved a similar concept in 2007. The Historic Preservation Office staff has commented on the projects throughout.<sup>1</sup>

This application has been referred to the Board because of the requested subdivision; the Old Georgetown Act does not grant the Commission of Fine Arts review jurisdiction over subdivisions. As for new construction, D.C. preservation law states that “the Mayor *may* refer the application to the Historic Preservation Review Board for recommendation, but *shall* so refer all applications that are not subject to review by the Commission of Fine Arts under the Old Georgetown Act.” (D.C. Official Code 6-1107(b); emphasis added). The law treats alterations and demolitions similarly, so Georgetown cases are ordinarily not referred to the Board for a parallel formal review which may duplicate or conflict with the CFA review.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The HPO’s last comments, from December, were that, “The building is improved [from November] by being mostly solid, with a lighter penthouse. The central pavilion seems not quite ‘there’ yet, with its bays upon bays or rowhouse-like front to the more warehouse-like apartment building. More unity to that projecting pavilion might help it integrate with what is behind. One thing that might help is carrying the storefronts across the front of the retail spaces, rather than dividing them into small bays. And rather than the recesses in the otherwise blank brick, some consideration could be given to making the surface of the whole building more interesting with patterned brick, rather than reveals or corbels.”

The previous month’s comments had been: “We are not wedded to the previous design that was reviewed several times, but it was sufficiently compatible. In the interest of getting something developed on this property after a decade, we are certainly willing to consider alternatives. Neither the idea of a glass building nor one of a glass building with masonry false fronts seems particularly compatible with the character of the historic district. The idea of a mostly masonry base building with a lighter, glassy attic story is a more promising approach, but Option A’s combination of crowded, residential-like bays with large, industrial-type windows is not very successful.” See also footnote 3.

<sup>2</sup> Last month, the Board did look at a Georgetown project that involves substantial demolition, because the CFA review had not prevented some of its more problematic aspects, largely as a consequence of the limitations of the CFA’s jurisdiction to things visible from a public thoroughfare. That project is being revised, however, and the

## **Demolition**

A one-story brick-faced-block Domino's pizza store would be demolished to make way for the project. That building was completed in 1965, putting it well outside the historic district's period of significance, meaning that it is a noncontributing structure and can be razed by right, without the Board's review.

## **Subdivision**

As stated above, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts has jurisdiction over the design of the project, but it does not share the Board's review jurisdiction over subdivisions.

This project was initially proposed to wrap behind and demolish some of the semidetached 1880 (former) house at 3259 Prospect, but that approach was discouraged by the OGB and HPO, and for that reason, HPO had opposed subdivision to consolidate the lots. The project was revised.<sup>3</sup>

But the idea of combining the Domino's lot (856) with the 3259 Prospect lot (103) was still pursued by the applicant, because the latter lot provides additional area that benefits the new building for zoning purposes while providing access and egress.

This proposal places no new construction behind 3259 Prospect, so the relationship between that former residence and its rear-yard space remains. Therefore, the central question to consider with regard to subdivision is, to the degree that the consolidation of the lots makes the proposed new construction possible, is the new construction compatible with the character of the historic district?

## **New construction**

The new construction just touches the historic house with a set-back two-story entrance piece, whereas the Domino's building now abuts the entire depth of the main block. There would, however, have to be a small opening (three by eight feet proposed) made between the buildings, necessary to officially make one building out of two when the lots are combined. Such a small amount of demolition does not constitute demolition of the building in significant part.

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review is expected to conclude without further Board review, but with review of the permit application by CFA and the HPO staff.

<sup>3</sup> Dennee to Old Georgetown Board, March 2, 2015: "We still support the concept for new construction that was approved in 2007, which forms the core of this proposal. Lot 856 seems large enough for a viable multi-story, multi-family, and even multi-use project. We cannot, however, support the design as presently proposed, because of the effects upon 3259 Prospect. The combination of the demolition and the construction of a taller building behind it are an incompatible treatment of the Victorian house and its twin. Construction of a larger building around 3259 could also destabilize the old foundations. The western wing of the new construction also adds too much complexity to the building's overall massing. For these reasons, we would oppose a subdivision to consolidate Lot 856 with Lot 103."

Dennee to Old Georgetown Board, April 1, 2015: "This revision is much preferable to the previous proposal, because the demolition has apparently been eliminated. It is not clear how the buildings connect, as they must if they are to stand on one lot (the connection shown is to a skylighted court). We are still concerned about the likely effects on the historic building of construction entirely around and beneath two sides."

Dennee to Old Georgetown Board, May 6, 2015: "The relationship of the new construction to 3259 Prospect Street has improved greatly. At this point, we feel comfortable shifting to consideration of the details of the new construction, such as whether the setbacks of the uppermost story and the rooftop mechanical are effective, especially along the west side of the building. We would like to see more development of façade details and materials, including the canopy and cornice over the ground-floor retail."

The new construction is double the height of the two-story Victorian house next door. Does that make the new work incompatible?

It probably goes without saying that new construction for such a site is going to be proposed as significantly larger than a diminutive nineteenth-century rowhouse. The preservation law's compatibility standard is interpreted as meaning that new construction should be sufficiently harmonious among the old, not that it be the same. The Board has generally approved larger new construction when a variety of heights appears on a block. To place the proposed mass immediately behind or on top of the historic building would certainly overwhelm it and create an odd massing. To place it next to it, in this context, is not incompatible simply because the context already contains large buildings, contributing and noncontributing, extending from Wisconsin Avenue to this lot. The new construction would mediate between those and the smaller historic buildings west and south of the site.

Of course, it is not for the sake of the *noncontributing* buildings that the Commission and the Board review new designs. It is for the protection of the historic ones. When this project was reviewed in 2006-2007, the CFA and the HPO staff opposed a *five-story* building as incompatible and requested that the fourth floor and any penthouse be set back from the street and from 3259 Prospect to diminish their visual impact on that building and on those across the street. The present project followed that guidance and added further plane changes to the lower floors, to respond to the principally two-story character of the surrounding historic buildings. Most of the mass is pushed away from 3259, with only a two-story-height piece attached as the new building's set-back residential entrance.

The building could still use some tweaks. The rowhouse-like projection of the first two stories may be too forced. The rooftop glass railing is too prominent and should be pushed back from the roof edges. The whole mass would be cleaner without the westward-projecting wing. The façade of the entry piece could use some refining and hierarchy. But we would recommend leaving to the Commission of Fine Arts review of design development.

### **Recommendation**

*As the project retains the historic building without overwhelming it, and has been found generally compatible with the character of the Georgetown Historic District by the Commission of Fine Arts and is subject to further CFA review, HPO recommends that the Board approve the subdivision in concept as compatible with the character of the historic district, and delegate to staff further review of the project.*